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ABSTRACT

This booklet deals with three ways in which to be an active citizen in a democracy: voting, communicating with elected officials, and volunteering. Words about citizenship that may be new to the reader are in bold print and underlined; a word box at the top of the page provides the meaning of specially marked words on that page. Part 1 on voting covers the fact that each vote matters, how to make an informed vote, who can vote, where to register to vote, changing registration, absentee ballots, where to vote, and what political parties are. Part 2 focuses on communicating with elected officials. It discusses reasons why one may wish to communicate with elected officials, writing letters, personal visits, telephone calls, local meetings, and program visits. Part 3 deals with volunteering and building a better community. It considers finding the right volunteer position and lists 23 volunteer referral services. (YLB)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

WE THE PEOPLE:

Guidelines To Taking Part in Democracy

CE 072 688

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Prepared by: Amanda Vig and Adult Learners for the Future (ALF)

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INTRODUCTION

What Does It Mean To Be A Citizen In A Democracy?

Our country is a democracy. That means it is run by the people for the people. Citizens in our democracy have rights. For example, we have the right to speak freely, to practice our religion, to vote, and so on.

Citizens in a democracy also have responsibilities. One of these responsibilities is to choose our leaders. Another is to keep informed about what is going on with our government. It is also the responsibility of citizens to help make their community and neighborhood good places in which to live.

A democracy needs active citizens in order to work. There are many ways to take part in a democracy. This booklet will deal with three ways to be an active citizen. These three ways are:

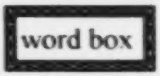
Voting

Communicating with Elected Officials

Volunteering

Word Boxes

As you read through this booklet, you may come across some words about citizenship that are new to you. If you see a word that is in **bold print** and underlined, look to the top of the page. You will see a



The word box will tell you the meaning of the specially marked words on that page.

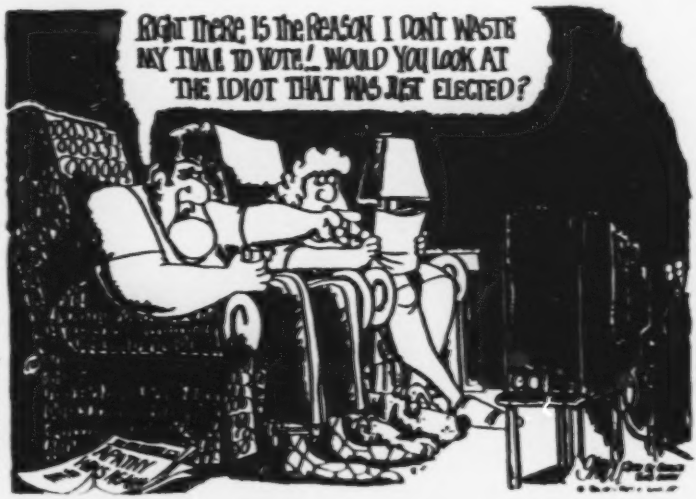
Below is a list of words that you will find in word boxes:

absentee ballot
bill
county Board of Elections
candidates
Congress
debate
elected official
election
House of Representatives
issues
legislative process
Ohio General Assembly
polls
precinct
register
resident
Senate
volunteer

PART ONE: Voting

Your Vote Matters

Your vote is your way of being represented in government. That means that when you vote you are making your needs and values known to the leaders of your country, state, and city. Your vote is your voice. If you do not use your vote, no one will hear you.



Ed Gamble. Reprinted with permission.

Being able to vote means having the right to choose. You are choosing who will make decisions that will affect your life. But when you do not vote, you are still making a choice. You are choosing to ***not*** take part in democracy. You are choosing to give up your most important right and responsibility as a citizen. You are choosing to be silent while other people make decisions for you.

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election - the event when people vote.

precinct - a local voting area. Every county has several precincts.

In an **election**, every vote counts. ***Your*** vote matters. If you do not think that your vote makes a difference, take a look at some events in history that were decided by just a few votes.

In 1776, the American colonists had come from many different countries and were deciding what the new country's official language would be. **Just one vote** decided that Americans would speak English rather than German.

In 1850, the young U.S. government was deciding whether or not it wanted to grow to the West. **Just one vote** made California a part of the United States.

In 1868 Congress was deciding whether it should remove President Andrew Johnson from office. **Just one vote** kept President Johnson from being removed.

In 1960 there was a very close presidential election. **Just three votes** per **precinct** made John F. Kennedy president instead of Richard Nixon.

Source How to Vote! *California Edition, Key to Community Voter Involvement Project.*•

issues - subjects that people vote on, like taxes or laws. When you vote on issues, you are not voting for candidates.

Making an Informed □ o□e

Making an informed vote means that you make a decision based on facts and information. You need to be informed to make sure you are choosing the person to best represent you and what you believe. You also need to know the facts to make decisions about **issues** that you will vote on.

To be an informed voter, you need to collect and sort through information. The following steps are adapted from a guide called *How to Pick Your Candidate* by Debbie Tasker. These steps will help you get and use information in order to make an informed vote.

1. Decide what things matter most to you. Pick out the things you care about. These things might include: health care, welfare, minimum wage, crime, social security, defense, schools, immigration, the environment, taxes, foreign aid, and so on.

candidates - people who want to be elected to an office. Candidates run for election.

2. Find out what the candidates think about the things that matter to you. You probably have seen ads about candidates on TV. Sometimes these ads will talk about how a candidate would solve a problem or what he or she believes in. Mostly though, the ads are made to make the candidate look good. They are made by people who are good at selling things that we buy. Sometimes these ads focus on what is wrong with the person who the candidate is running against rather than saying what the candidate believes in.

Candidates may use buzzwords. These are words that sound good and that people like to hear. They may not mean much, though. Candidates may say they are for "law and order". That sounds good but what does it mean? Does the candidate want more police? Does he/she want more jails? How much money will it cost? Where will the money come from?

STARVATION DIET

debate - the discussion of questions or issues. Debates are usually between two or more people who have different points of view.

Know more before you pick your candidate. You need to know what the candidate thinks about things that are important to you. Do you agree with his or her ideas? How did the candidate vote in the past? What does the candidate want to do if he or she wins the election? To get this information, you can go to a number of different sources such as:

- news reports on the TV, radio, and in newspapers and magazines,
- **debates** between candidates on TV,
- local meetings where candidates explain their views,
- The League of Women Voters in your area,
- **Project: Vote Smart's** Voter's Research Hotline 1-800-622-7627.

3. Pick the candidate that most agrees with your ideas and values. You want to vote for the best candidate for you. That could be a person of any race or religion. It does not matter what the candidate looks like or what his/her name is. What matters is the candidate's ideas.

4. Be sure you think the candidate can do the job. Ask yourself questions like: What does the candidate promise to do? Does he/she promise everything to everybody? Does he/she promise too many things? Can the candidate really do what he/she says?

5. Plan to vote and do it.

polls- the place where people go to vote in their neighborhood

general election - the event in the Fall where people vote for the candidates that they want to be elected. People also vote on issues at general elections.

resident (of Ohio) - a person who makes his/her home in Ohio.

primary - the event in the Spring where people vote for people that they want to be their party's candidates in the Fall general election. People also vote for issues at primary elections.

registered - to be signed up to vote.

Questions?

If you are not sure about what to do in order to vote, you are not alone. A lot of people have questions about voting rules. In the following pages, some questions about voting will be answered. If you have more questions, call the Elections Department at the Ohio Secretary of State's Office: (614) 466-2585. Also, you can ask the workers at the **polls** whose job it is to help you with any questions you have about voting.

Who can vote?

You can vote if you are:

- an American citizen
- at least 18 years old by the day of the **general election**.
- a **resident** of Ohio for at least 30 days before the day of the general election or **primary**.
- not in prison.
- **registered** to vote at least 30 days before the day of the election.

county Board of Elections - a government agency that sets up and runs the elections in each county. For example, it is the Board of Elections that sets up polls and hires poll workers.

How can I register to vote?

Fill out a voter registration card. You can get a card from several places:

- Libraries
- High Schools
- Bureau of Motor Vehicles
- County Treasurer's Office
- Boards of Elections
- Secretary of State's Office
- Voter Registration Hotline: 1-800-753-VOTE (8683)

Mail or hand in the card. The card must be received by the **county Board of Elections** or be postmarked **30 days before the election** in which you want to vote.

What happens after I send in my registration card?

Your county Board of Elections will send you a postcard 2-4 weeks after they get your registration card. On this postcard, you will find out where you are to go to vote.

absentee ballot - a ballot is a form on which voters mark their vote. An absentee ballot is a ballot that people can mail in if they cannot go to the polls to vote.

Do I ever have to change my registration?

Yes, sometimes you do. You have to update your registration if you:

- move or
- change your name

What if I am not going to be in town when there is an election?

You can still vote but you need to get an **absentee ballot**.

How do I get an absentee ballot?

You get it from the Board of Elections in your county. Write or call them. You need to get an absentee ballot by noon Saturday before the election. You could also go to the Board of Elections and vote on the Saturday or the day before election day. The Board of Elections needs to get your ballot back by 7:30 p.m. on election day.

What if I am sick or physically not able to get out and vote

Again, you can use an absentee ballot.

Where do I go to vote?

Voting places, or polls, are in libraries, schools, places of worship, and other places in the community. You will need to vote in the place set up for people that live in your neighborhood. If you do not know where you should vote, call your county Board of Elections.

What are political parties?

A political party is a group of people who share the same goals and try to win elections. Currently, the two biggest political parties in Ohio are the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. There are other smaller parties such as the Natural Law Party and the Reform Party.

Do I have to tell people what party I support?

No, you do not have to tell people what party you support in order to vote in the Fall general election. But you need to if you are voting for people running in a primary election (See page 8). In a primary election you can only vote for people who are trying to be that party's candidate in the general election. You have to fill out a form when you do so. If in the next primary election you want to vote for people in another party, you need to fill out another form. Remember:

- Party only matters in the primary election if you are voting for candidates rather than issues only.
- In the Fall general election, you can vote for whoever you want. It does not matter how you voted in the Spring primary.

elected officials - people who are chosen by voters to do a job in government.

PART TWO: Communicating With Elected Officials

The leaders of our country are **elected officials**. They are made leaders because people vote for them to do the job. Leaders work for the people. That means that we, the people, must communicate with them about what to do. We must let our elected officials know what we think.

Elected officials listen when people who vote for them talk. They want and need to hear from you. You have the right to communicate with elected officials who represent you. But many people do not. Some people feel afraid or do not know how to tell their elected officials what they think. The information that follows will help you communicate with your elected officials. You will find tips for how to:

- write a letter
- pay a visit
- make a phone call
- speak at a meeting

legislative process - the steps that go into making a law.

Why Communicate with Your Elected Officials?

There are many reasons to communicate with your elected officials. You may want to:

- thank them for something they have done.
- ask them to take some sort of action.
- let them know how you feel about concerns such as education, crime, taxes or the environment.

But even before you can think of a reason to write, visit, or call your elected officials, you must be informed about what they are doing.

Being an informed citizen is always important. It is important for making an informed vote. And, it is important for keeping track of the **legislative process.** The tips in Part One about making an informed vote can also help you stay informed about what your elected officials are doing now. Remember:

- Think about what matters to you.
- Find out what your elected officials are doing about these concerns. Look in newspapers and magazines. Listen to news shows on the radio and TV. Attend meetings where officials speak or work, such as school board meetings, and other town meetings. Talk to other informed citizens.

Letters

It has been said that the only letter that has no impact is the one that is not written. One of the best ways to let elected officials know what you think is to write a letter. Elected officials can be influenced by peoples' feelings, thoughts and stories. The following tips will help you write your own letter.

Be neat

Make sure your letter is easy to read. You can write it by hand or type it.

Write the greeting of the letter.

For example:

- Dear Senator Smith
- Dear Representative Smith
- Dear Mayor Smith
- Dear Governor Smith
- Dear President Smith

Get right to the point.

In the first few sentences, say

- who you are,
- where you are from, and
- why you are writing.

bill - a plan for a law that has not yet been made into a law. If a bill is passed, it is a law. If the bill is not passed, there is no new law.

Stick to one issue per letter.

For example, you may write:

- to state your support for issues such as health care, the environment, national defense, and so on,
- to thank an elected official for something he or she has done, or
- to say that you are for or against a certain **bill**.

Support your point.

Use the rest of the letter to tell your thoughts, story, and/or ideas. Make the letter personal to you.

Be clear

Tell the elected official what you would like him or her to do. For example, if you are writing about a bill, say if you want your elected official to vote for or against it.

Be polite

Do not preach or scold.

Keep it short

Limit your letter to one page.

Congress - the branch of our national government that makes the laws. Congress is made up of two parts: the House of Representatives and the Senate.

House of Representatives - one of the two houses of Congress. Each state elects representatives to go to Washington, DC to work in the House of Representatives.

Senate - one of the two houses of Congress. Each state elects two senators to send to Washington, DC to work in the Senate.

Ohio General Assembly - our state's version of the national Congress. The two houses are the Ohio House of Representatives and the Ohio Senate. Together these two houses are responsible for making our state laws.

If you are writing about a bill, know the facts.

If you are writing about a national bill, know the number of it and where it is in **Congress**. If the bill is in the United States **House of Representatives** it is called a House bill and has a number like this: HR 1234. If the bill is in the United States **Senate** it is called a Senate bill and has a number like this: S.1234. To find out where a national bill is in the legislative process, call the **Bill Status Office: (202) 225-1772.**

Ohio

If you are writing about a state bill, find out where it is in the **Ohio General Assembly**. If the bill is in the Ohio House of Representatives, it will be called by a number like this: HB: 1234. If the bill is in the Ohio Senate, it will be called by a number like this: SB: 1234. To find out where a state bill is in the legislative process in Ohio, call **Ohio Legislative Information: 1-800-282-0253.**

Know the name and address of the elected official to whom you want to write.

The Honorable (full name)
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable (full name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

If you have any questions about where to send your letter, call Legislative Information: 1-800-688-9889, ext. 9.

Ohio

The Honorable (full name)
Ohio Senate
Senate Office Building
Columbus, OH 43215-4211

The Honorable (full name)
Ohio House of Representatives
77 S. High Street
Columbus, OH 43266-0603

If you have any questions about where to send your letter in Ohio, call Legislative Information: 1-800-282-0253.

For information that will help you contact the elected officials in your city or town, check your telephone book.

SAMPLE LETTER

The Honorable John Doe
United State Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Doe,

My name is Jane Smith and I live in Anytown. I am writing to urge you to help keep laws to make sure our water stays clean.

I have three children. Their health is very important to me. I am afraid that without laws people will dump chemicals and other poisons in lakes and rivers. This could harm people and animals too.

Please vote in favor of S. 9999 when it comes to a vote in the Senate. That law will make sure that bodies of water can't be polluted.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Sincerely,

Jane Smith

Personal Visits

Meeting with an elected official is a good way to communicate on a personal level. It makes the point that real people like you are interested in the choices that are made about your city, state, or country. Tips on the next few pages will help you before, during, and after your meeting with elected officials.

Setting up the meeting

Call the elected official's office to set up a meeting time. If you are not able to meet with the elected official in person, you should get a chance to meet with a person who works for him or her. This staff person will let the elected official know what you said.

To find the phone number of the elected official that you want to meet with, call Legislative Information:

For national elected officials:
1-800-688-9889 ext. 9

For Ohio elected officials:
1-800-282-0253

For elected officials in your city and town, check your telephone book.

Before you go...

- Make sure the elected official you will be meeting with knows why you want to meet. You can tell the person you speak with on the telephone to set up the meeting why you want to talk to the official. Also, let the elected official know who will be at the meeting. If you are going with other people, let the elected official know their names.

- Choose a spokesperson. If you are going with other people, choose one person to speak for all of you. Make sure you all agree on what he or she should say.

- Plan to talk about only one topic.

- Know the facts about that topic. For example, if you want to talk about adult education, know things such as how many students are in your program. If you are talking about a bill, know the number of the bill. *(See page 16 for help with this.)*

- Put together a one-page summary of your main points. You can leave this with the elected official after your meeting.

- Practice what you want to say in the meeting. Time yourself. Make sure you can say everything in 5 minutes.

At the meeting...

- Introduce yourself. If there are other people with you, introduce them as well.
- Thank the elected official for making the time to meet with you.
- Get right to the point. In your first few sentences say why you are there. Be brief, simple, and straight-forward.
- Listen to what the elected official has to say.
- If the elected official asks you a question that you do not know the answer to, say so. Say that you will find the answer and write back to him or her.
- Before you leave, sum up your main point.
- Thank the elected official. Offer to leave a summary of your main points.

After the meeting...

- Write a thank you note.
- Send any information that you said you would.

Telephone Calls

Telephone calls are a good way to communicate with an elected official if you need to make your point quickly. For example, if you want to tell your elected official how you feel about a bill that is about to be voted on, you might want to call him or her.

Just like with a letter or a personal visit, it is a good idea to prepare before you take action. The tips below will help you do that.

- If you are calling about a certain bill, know its name and number. *(See page 16 for help.)*

- If the bill is in the Senate then try to talk to your Senator. If the bill is in the House of Representatives, try to talk to your representative. To find out who your national and state Senators and Representatives are, call Legislative Information. *(See the box at the bottom of this page.)*

- Sometimes the elected official cannot come to the phone when you call. If this is the case, ask to speak to the elected official's staff person, who is taking calls about the bill.

- State your point right away. Be clear about how you want your elected official to act.

- Be prepared to support your point if asked to do so.

- If no one is there to take your call, leave a short but clear message.

For national elected officials: 1-800-688-9889 ext.9
For Ohio elected officials: 1-800-282-0253

Local Meetings

A good way to communicate with your elected officials is to go to meetings where they will be. School board meetings, neighborhood association meetings, and other types of town meetings give citizens the chance to speak up. The tips below will help you prepare for speaking out at a meeting.

Before you go...

- Call ahead to see if you have to sign up to speak. Different meetings have different rules.
- Prepare to stick to one issue.
- Organize your thoughts. Be prepared to defend them. In order to do this, you need to know the facts about your topic.

During your speech...

- Speak clearly.
- State your point right away. Keep the time limit in mind if there is one.
- Be polite. Don't scold or preach.
- If you are asked a question to which you do not know the answer, say so. Offer to find out the answer and get back with the person later.

Program Visits

Another way to communicate with elected officials about local issues is to invite them to come to you. For example, if you are concerned about funding for a program in your community, you might want to invite an elected official to visit that program. That way the official can see what the program is doing and how people are benefitting from it.

volunteers - Someone who works or helps without pay.

PART THREE: Volunteering

Volunteering: Building A Better Community

Volunteers are the glue that keeps a community together. Volunteers fill in the gaps. If these gaps were not filled, our communities would suffer. Volunteers do many things in many different ways, such as helping to clean up their community, tutoring, or helping a child. Without volunteers, many jobs would not get done. Imagine what your community would be like without the help of volunteers. When you think about it, it is easy to see how important the role of volunteers is to a community.

When you volunteer, you will be taking an active part in making your community a better place. You give something back to your community. And when you give something back, you will also get something in return. You get the rewards that come from making a positive difference in the lives of others in your community.

Finding a Volunteer Position that is Right for You

Many people do not know what volunteer work they would like to do. Ask yourself the questions below to find out what you are interested in and how you would like to share your time. These questions are based on those from a brochure called *Questions to Ask*, put out by the Voluntary Action Center with The United Way of Massachusetts Bay Area.

Time

- How much free time do I have to do volunteer work?
- How many hours a week would I like to volunteer?
- How long am I expected to volunteer? How long am I able to volunteer?

Skills / Interests / Experience

- Why do I want to be a volunteer? Will the job I choose meet those reasons?
- Have I done volunteer work before? What did I like / dislike about it? Do I want to do something similar again? Do I want to do something different?
- Do I have any interests or hobbies that I would like to use in my volunteer job?

Setting

- How far am I willing to travel to do volunteer work?
- Do I want to work outside?
- In what kind of place do I want to work? Hospital? School? Nursing Home? Office? Gift Shop? Shelter or Soup Kitchen? Recreational Facility? Museum? Camp? Park? Zoo? Playground? Theater? Laboratory?

People

- Do I want to work by myself or with people?
- With what age group do I want to work? Infants? Children? Teenagers? Adults? Elderly?
- Do I want to work with people with special needs such as people who have a physical handicap or who are sick?
- Do I want to work one-on-one with a person or with a group of people?

Personal Considerations

- How would I get to the volunteer job? Would I drive or take a bus or taxi?
- Do I have any health or other problems that I should think about when choosing a volunteer job? Is there anything that may make a certain place a poor volunteer site for me?
- Am I on medicine that needs to be taken at a certain time? Could I do the volunteer job and still take my medication?
- Do I know someone who would be willing to speak about my strengths to the director of the volunteer program? Have I asked them in advance so they will know that they will be contacted?
- If I am under age 21, do I understand that there may be certain volunteer jobs that I can't do because I am too young?

Source "Questions to Ask", Voluntary Action Center, United Way of Mass. Bay

LISTING OF VOLUNTEER REFERRAL SERVICES

ATHENS
Ohio University Center for Community Service
204 Baker Center
Ohio University
Athens, OH 45701
Terrence Hogan, Director **614-593-4007**
fax: 614-593-0987

BUTLER
Middletown Area United Way
29 City Centre Plaza
Middletown, OH 45042-1901 **513-423-9761**
fax: 513-423-0005

CLARK
Volunteer Service Bureau of Clark County
616 North Limestone Street
Springfield, OH 45503
Jacquelyn Juergens, Director **937-322-4262**
fax: 937-324-2605

CLERMONT
United Way Volunteer Resource Center / Eastern Area
2085-A Front Wheel Drive
Batavia, OH 45103
Brenda Clifton, Manager **513-536-3003**
fax: 513-536-3015

CUYAHOGA
Volunteer Center - Business Volunteerism Council
1125 Terminal Tower
Cleveland, OH 44113-2204
Elizabeth Voudouris, Asst. Director **216-736-7711**
fax: 216-736-7710

ERIE
Volunteer Center of Erie County
108 West Shoreline Drive
Sandusky, OH 44870
419-627-0074
fax: 419-627-1402

FRANKLIN
Firstlink
370 South Fifth Street
Columbus, OH 43215
Marilee Chinnici-Zuercher, Executive Director
614-221-6766
fax: 614-224-6866

GEAUGA
Volunteer Bureau - Geauga United Way
107 Water Street
Chardon, OH 44024-1201
Linda J. Huron, Manager
216-285-3194
fax: 216-286-3442

HAMILTON
United Way Volunteer Resource Center
2400 Reading Road
Cincinnati, OH 45202-1478
Lucy Crane, Manager
513-762-7192
or 513-762-7138

HANCOCK
United Way of Hancock County - Volunteer Action Center
124 West Front Street
Findlay, OH 45840
Joani Smith, Director
419-423-1775
fax: 419-423-4918

HURON
Volunteer Center in Huron County
258 Benedict Avenue
Norwalk, OH 44857
Mary L. Geoghan, Exec. Director **419-663-1179**
fax: 419-668-9525

LAKE
Volunteer Connection - United Way of Lake County
9285 Progress Parkway
Mentor, OH 44060
Lucy Nixon, Director **216-352-3166**
fax: 216-975-1220

LORAIN
The Volunteer Action Center of Lorain County, Inc.
2929 West River Road
Elyria, OH 44035
Minnie E. Taylor, Exec. Director **216-240-1990**
fax: 216-324-4872

LUCAS
United Way of Greater Toledo - Voluntary Action Center
1 Stranahan Square, Suite 160
Toledo, OH 43604
Robert Krompak, Director of Outreach Services
419-244-3036 or 419-224-3728
fax: 419-246-4614

MAHONING
Volunteer Center of Youngstown/Mahoning Valley
5500 Market Street, Suite 106
Youngstown, OH 44512
Kathy Gordon, Director **330-782-1220**
fax: 330-782-5001

MEDINA
United Way Volunteer Center of Medina County
113 East Homestead Street
Medina, OH 44256
Christine Kurth, Director **330-725-2000**
fax: 330-725-3000

MONTGOMERY
Voluntary Action Center - United Way of Greater Dayton
184 Salem Avenue
Dayton, OH 45406
Pamela D. Becker, Director **937-225-3066**
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OTTAWA
Ottawa County United Way
127 West Perry Street, Suite 104
Port Clinton, OH 43452
Chris Galvin, Director **419-734-6645**
fax: 419-734-4841

STARK
United Way Volunteer and Community Services
618 Second Street, NW
Canton, OH 44703-2700
Linda Woit, Director **330-453-9172**
fax: 330-455-8909

SUMMIT
The Volunteer Center of Summit County
425 West Market Street
Akron, OH 44303-2044
Josie M. McElroy, Exec. Director **216-762-8991**
fax: 216-762-3121

WARREN
Voluntary Action Center - Warren County United Way
20 North Mechanic Street
Lebanon, OH 45036
Karen Rossi, Director **513-932-3987**
fax: 513-932-4496

WAYNE
Volunteer Registry
c/o United Way's Infolink
215 South Walnut Street
Wooster, OH 44691 **330-263-6363**
fax: 330-264-5607

WOOD
Wood County United Way
519 West Wooster #3
Bowling Green, OH 43402
Nadine Musser, Director **419-352-2390**
fax: 419-353-0608

Source: The Points of Light Directory

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